



P E R S P E C T I V E S

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Water, Water... and Not a Drop to Drink *Santa Barbara's Solution*

You may recall the 18th-century poem, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. It is an incredible story of one man's abuse of nature causing devastation all around him. In the tale, the Ancient Mariner is the navigator of the vessel on which he sailed, and after some misadventures, his ship is caught in ice. A beautiful albatross appears, seeming to be a blessing, and frees the ship from the ice flow that encapsulated it. The albatross in the poem represents the nurturing beauty of nature—much as earth's biosphere does to us.

Like today's "big game hunters", the Mariner shoots the albatross for reasons of pure "sport". At once the ship is cursed and loses the wind necessary to carry it forward. The Mariner is left to observe that he is surrounded by death and nothing but saltwater—which of course he cannot drink. His abuse of nature has left him stranded in a desert of non-potable water.

If only he could have been able to drink salt water! Perhaps then his pure folly and environmental desecration would have been ameliorated. The surface of the Earth, after all, is three-fifths water and as the sea level rises, that proportion is only getting bigger. Turning seawater to fresh water would not exempt the Mariner from his overtly bad conduct in abusing nature, but it would provide an "escape hatch" when environmental destruction has gone too far.

As you read this, you are no doubt aware that the most severe drought in California's history is ramping up even as the Colorado River (once a mainstay of Southern California water) is drying up, and our lakes and reservoirs are at only 35 percent capacity or less—and dropping. The Sierra snowpack is badly reduced, and Santa Barbara has had hardly any rainfall this year. Agriculture continues to be "entitled" to about 75 percent of the water that does get down here, and a lively business has arisen where farmers are "selling" their water allotments. This even as the Inland Valley continues to grow massive amounts of water-intensive almonds and cotton, which is happening in the context of an entire Inland Valley that has literally dropped by several feet due to the depletion of underground water reserves. What are our choices to stave off death by thirst—first of our green environment and then ourselves?

One option hinted at above, would be to immediately alter the state water rationing system with a preference for human survival over almonds and cotton! Why don't we give priority to our scarce water reserves to folks who live in the cities rather than the crops in the field? Losing some farm revenue is a fraction as harmful as the economic damage that will be done to the 38 million of us who live in California's cities and suburbs. Frankly, it's surprising that voters haven't forced this on the Legislature by now.

A second possible solution has been proposed many times over the years. Most recently it's been championed by the comedian Bill Maher on his HBO show, where he has been aggressively asking the question, "If we can build oil and gas pipelines all over the country why can't we build one to carry water from the Midwest where they have too much to the drought ravaged states of California, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico?" Or for that matter, from the Northwest if the drought in Washington and Oregon is

alleviated in future seasons. This idea is so attractive to many that it is going to be the subject of next week's column, so be sure to watch for it.

A third option, and the most obvious, is to get Santa Barbara's desalination plant up to capacity and running (and ultimately expanded to carry more water) so it can supply at least the 17 percent of Montecito's planned water budget for this upcoming year and increasing amounts in years to come. For a great summary of how Montecito will stay sufficiently wet this year, go grab a copy of last week's Montecito Journal for their take on the water issue.

The problem with this third option, however, is that *Santa Barbara is doing absolutely nothing to protect the desalination plant from rising sea levels*. That's right, the plant is built at today's sea level which means in future years it will be below water and thereby cease to function! When a recent Mayoral candidate was asked what steps Santa Barbara was planning on taking to deal with climate change, the candidate feebly responded "nothing, as that is a regional or federal issue." How wrong he was! Climate change is very much a local issue, and the desalination plant is but one perfect example.

Currently, the plan is to run the desalination plant at sea level, then *pump clean water uphill* to the park, and inject it into the municipal water distribution system. What happens when sea levels continue to rise, rendering the desalination plant obsolete just as we increasingly need it as climate change causes the drought to deepen through the upcoming years? More to the point, what can we do about it now?

It's time for some serious long-term planning. Shouldn't we be pumping seawater *up the hill* (that way rising sea levels will never adversely affect its operations and only shorten the distance seawater must be pumped), powering it with renewable energy, and desalinating it there so the fresh water can still go straight into the same injection point? This will cost money and time but waiting for sea level rise to stop the desalination plant from running will be far more tragic and far more expensive. Let's not be ostriches sticking our collective heads into the sand. The sea level is rising, and that rise is accelerating. Now is the time to address it so all the "water everywhere" will in fact be drinkable indefinitely into the future.

As to the Mariner, he did eventually obtain absolution from a holy man on shore for his abuse of nature and the cycle of death immediately stopped. Altering our behavior now is one way to acknowledge what we've done to the biosphere so we can obtain absolution for our earlier follies as we begin, each place along an ocean, to prepare for the inevitable dislocations human civilization has caused.

Published in the 09/30/2021 edition of the Montecito Journal